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“El milk del translate”: Poetic Undifference in Cecilia Vicuña’s *Instan*

Rebecca Kosick

The last few years have seen a surge of interest in the Chilean-born, New York-based artist and poet, Cecilia Vicuña.¹ This growth in attention contrasts with a period of relative underappreciation of her half century of work. As Sabrina Gschwandtner and others have suggested, this was not a passive accident. In part because of the very same characteristics that are now bringing attention to her aesthetic practice—including concerns with indigenous rights, ecological justice, feminism, and socialism—Vicuña’s work can be understood as having suffered from certain modes of “erasure” (Vicuña and Gschwandtner). As Vicuña tells Gschwandtner, this fact may be “less about ‘her’ being erased and more about the systematic erasure of the idea that different fields of knowledge are interconnected—especially where these concern indigenous women’s knowledge” (Vicuña and Gschwandtner). Such knowledge and its materialization in art are central to Vicuña’s practice.

This is the case across both visual and poetic realms, though the visual and the poetic are not necessarily distinct for Vicuña. That said, her work with language, poetry, and the book form are important facets of Vicuña’s practice. And poetry is an important arena in which she explores the potential for indistinction, interconnection, and undifferentiation. To examine how this

¹ In 2018 alone, exhibitions of her work in the United States included *La india contaminada* at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York; *Disappeared Quipu* at the Brooklyn Museum; *PALABRArmas* at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society in Chicago; and contributions to the group exhibition, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* that was first shown at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and moved the following year to the Brooklyn Museum. In addition, a major new collection of her poetry, edited and translated by longtime collaborator Rosa Alcalá, was published by Kelsey Street Press in 2018.

operates, this essay will focus primarily on a poemario Vicuña “drew-wrote between 1995 and 2002,” entitled *Instan*.²

Published as a limited edition of 1500 copies, *Instan* is a slim volume of text and drawings. As the section “carta or end note” describes, the book “is the journey inside the word *instan*,” which it indicates,

is the third person plural of the infinitive “instar,” meaning “to urge, press, reply.” It first appears in Spanish in 1490, and is associated with political demands. In English it means “to stud with stars.”

For me it suggests a movement inward, towards the *sta*, the inner star “standing” in the verb “to be”: *estar*. (“carta or end note”)
As the poet notes on her website, *Instan*, “is presented in three different forms: as line drawings of words exploding in space, as poem in short verses, and as a reflection on its own creative process” (Cecilia Vicuña). These three forms of presentation are divided by five sections: 1. *gramma kellcani* (the drawings), 2. *el poema cognado* / the poem, 3. *fábulas del comienzo e restos del origen* / fables of the beginning and remains of the origin, 4. *carta or end note*, and 5. *dixio nary a diction*. The sections are numbered and listed in the contents and appear in the book in this order. The book has no page numbers.

Combining drawings with poetry in verse and prose, *Instan* is written in at least three languages (English, Spanish, and Quechua) that variously intertwine and indistinguish themselves through Vicuña’s characteristic use of punning and wordplay. Many themes and forms familiar to her work are present, but, *Instan* is overwhelmingly a book *about* language, and the ways in which language can operate to connect and un-erase the divisions that have been imposed on what Vicuña calls with skepticism “different fields of knowledge” (Vicuña and Gschwandtner).

² Because *Instan* has no page numbers, I will cite using section titles or descriptions as necessary. This quote appears in a final untitled note of acknowledgement on *Instan*’s penultimate page.

This essay will focus attention on the ways in which language works in *Instan*, and elsewhere in Vicuña's practice, in order to examine how Vicuña challenges existing paradigms for understanding what counts as language, what counts as translation, and how apparently distinct modes of expression can be productively undifferentiated. *Instan*, with its multilingual and multimedia approach, does not require transparency or fluency. It builds from obstacles and opacities, and it offers a rich set of possibilities for understanding linguistic encounters without an assumption of linguistic differentiation (either among so-called "national" languages or between text and other kinds of matter). *Instan*, instead, underscores the connectedness of various kinds of knowledge and the modes of communication in which this knowledge is recorded, materialized, and expressed.

***Instan*, in the first instance**

The first section of *Instan*, "gramma kellcani (the drawings)," is a series of faint hand-drawings that incorporate alphabetic letters (handwritten; sometimes in print and sometimes in script) and lines (often connecting the letters and words to one another, forming various shapes). The drawings appear to have been done originally in pencil, and their reproduction in the Kelsey Street Press edition is such that they look almost exactly as if they have been done directly into the book. The shapes include circles, spirals, zigzags, stars, waves, semicircles, and diamonds—forms that, as José Felipe Alvergue points out have "Incan architectonic symbolism" (63). In this section, letters dot the endpoints of pencil lines, comprise parts of the lines themselves, or weave throughout the shapes. As with elsewhere in the book, phrases often move between languages without interruption, literally connected by a drawn poetic line in which, for example, "el milk del translate" is entangled.

Fig. 1. “el milk del translate”

The second section, “el poema cognado / the poem” is a narrow poem typeset in verse line that reforms, repeats, and reiterates many of the phrases written into the drawings of section one, such as

milk
del trans
late? (*Instan*, “el poema cognado / the poem”)

This time, the phrase ends with a question mark and begins without the definite article “el” before “milk.” As with the break inside of “trans/late,” line breaks in this section often occur in the middle of words, and words are frequently broken by horizontal spacing as well. These breaks form new words, highlight words embedded within others, or (among other possibilities) provide a junction in which a word might stretch itself across more than one language, generating multiple, and multilingual, meanings as it goes. This is the case with, for example,

su salva t
ción (*Instan*, “el poema cognado / the poem”)

or

el
e
star (*Instan*, “el poema cognado / the poem”)

Section three, “fábulas del comienzo e restos del origen / fables of the beginning and remains of the origin” opens with citations from Emily Dickinson (in English), Clarice Lispector (in Portuguese), and Barbara Guest (in English). Typeset, the poetic lines in this section are longer, with words stretching across the page and making use of the space it offers. As before,

words are broken to make space for multiple meanings and languages, and many of the lines contain re-phrasings of phrases also in use by the prior sections, such as “el estar” (this time without line breaks). Others echo or repeat phrases that appeared earlier with a greater degree of difference:

la leche manando, la lengua y el
trans. (“fábulas del comienzo e restos del origen / fables of the beginning and
remains of the origin”)

The fourth section, “carta or end note” is a small, explanatory portion of the book typeset in short prose paragraphs. It describes the origins of the book, how “it began as a night vision that landed on the page as a wave.” Again, Spanish and English are frequently intertwined with no differentiation. Vicuña also writes in this section that “the poem was born as a cognate, *un cognado potens* in search of a middle ground, a language that would be readable or unreadable from both.” Here, “both” likely refers to Spanish and English, which are the primary languages from which *Instan* draws, yet this and other sections also interweave further languages, especially Quechua, but also Portuguese, Greek, Latin, and any number of languages into which *Instan*’s wordplay may tumble—intentionally or not.

Finally, the section “dixio nary a diction” occupies the space of a glossary and is styled as one, though it is not ordered alphabetically. It lists and offers definitions for non-English words and phrases, yet, as might be expected, also offers another opportunity for the book’s characteristic wordplay. For example, the “definition” for “fulgentes” is “‘full of people’ (gente is people), but no, it really means *relampaguear*, to flash with lightning” (“dixio nary a diction”). Here, the definition helps extract the interlingual pun Vicuña identifies in “fulgentes.” Like this example, many definitions contain non-English words or phrases that are sometimes demarcated by italics, sometimes not, and are often further defined themselves. For example, the definition

for “alba” is: “alba: dawn, white, first light, ritual dress, a palindrome of habla, speech. Divining through echoes, the Incas composed crucial words as palindromes: *wiñay qallallallaq pacha*, the fertility of all generations” (“dixio nary a diction”). Or, the definition for “latus” is “to carry, as in *relatus*: relate, translate” (“dixio nary a diction”). The dixio nary a diction precedes a final note of acknowledgement.

“El milk del translate”

As these examples demonstrate, *Instan* also has something to say about translation. I want to call attention to this feature in order to provoke an important claim of this essay: that the version of translation at play in *Instan* is distinct from a principally binary and textual model of translation in which a message in one language is rearticulated in a second. Partly because of the challenges that a translingual text like *Instan* poses to this model of translation, scholars, including Alvergue, have pointed out that “Vicuña does not expect her work to be translated in order to be understood.” (78). I agree that being translated is not what will yield understanding of Vicuña’s poetry, but I don’t want to discard translation as important to, or active in, *Instan*. Instead, I wish to suggest that *Instan* proposes a vision of translation that privileges undifferentiation and reciprocity—between languages, and between text and matter. *Instan* doesn’t assume or address a monolingual reader. Rather, it draws its reader into the space of what the “carta or end note” calls “un cognado potens” that, like the poet/artist’s work in general, is invested in the interconnectedness of lost or repressed knowledge.

The space of the “cognado potens” is a translational space, but as *Instan* would define it. Translation here is not a direct or complete movement from one “national” language to another, but involves extensive poetic activity in the overlapping spaces of those languages that are interwoven by *Instan*. And it involves deliberate and sustained engagement with cognates and

homonyms, including those that might, in other contexts, be considered faux amis or mistranslations of one another. For example, in the *dixio nary a diction*, the definition for “leche” is “milk, latte.” On the surface, “leche” and “milk” are straightforward translations of one another in that both words refer to the same substance. And there isn’t an immediate indication that any play with cognates or homophones is really going on here, though “latte” stands out in this definition for a number of reasons, suggesting there’s more to unpack.

“Leche” means “milk” and “latte” also means milk, in Italian. Of course, the presence of a word in yet another language shouldn’t necessarily be remarkable in the context of *Instan*. As I’ve noted, lots of languages intertwine themselves—in the book, generally, and in the “*dixio nary a diction*,” in particular. Nevertheless, while it isn’t the case everywhere in the book, in the “*dixio nary a diction*,” it is usually the case that non-English words appearing in its definitions are italicized. It happens with the Latin “*stella*,” “*veritas*,” and “*adimas*,” for example, the Quechua “*wiñay qallallallaq pacha*,” and what the “*dixio nary a diction*” describes as “the Proto Indo-European root” “*ma*.” Each of these is italicized, suggesting that the “*dixio nary a diction*,” perhaps more than elsewhere in the book, does have a primarily English-reading reader in mind, or sees itself as a chance to let a monolingual English reader in on the multilingual activity that took shape in the preceding sections. That said, this is at best a partial gesture in that, as Sarah Dowling indicates, the “*dixio nary a diction*” “actually excludes most phrases written in Spanish, representing only a few key words and concepts” (40).

However, “latte,” as the Italian word for milk, is an exception to what we might call the section’s norms. It is unitalicized and unmarked, more akin to prior sections’ approach where no linguistic differentiation is formally signaled among words. “Latte” is also an English word, referring to a kind of coffee preparation, but as a translation of “leche,” the English word “latte”

is not, on a meaningful level, accurate. It's not entirely unrelated either. A kind of coffee preparation that prominently includes milk, "latte" is a word in English that both suggests milk and sounds (more) similar to "leche." That said, the two words aren't as close as, for example, the pair of "salvación"/"salvation" that Vicuña combines elsewhere.

To make "sense," this definition demands some multilingual, multimedia, and multisensory associations from the reader. It produces in English an opportunity to trace the ways a word and its associative meanings, sounds, and spellings do cross and span a set of languages within the book and within these languages' shared histories. And it is tangled up with the book's meditation on and practice of its own sort of translation. Here is where the homonymy comes in: latte is the "milk del translate" if translate is pronounced "trans-latte."

In the entry for "word" in Barbara Cassin's *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, Cassin notes that homonymy and amphiboly (grammar-induced ambiguity) are "confusions produced by the very materiality of language" (1247). In other instances of speech, these confusions are roadblocks that can disrupt the path of understanding. In other instances of translation, these are, as Emily Apter acknowledges, "tricks that language plays on the translator" (Apter, *Against World Literature* 25). In *Instan* these "tricks" are not missteps or marks of bad translation, but generative confusions that take advantage of the material connections between languages and reveal the interconnectedness of apparently distinct forms of knowledge and expression.

Addressing Cassin's *Dictionary*, Apter invokes "a translational condition that complicates nation-based epistemes and literary denominations" (*Against World Literature* 31). Something akin to this complication is at work in Vicuña's *Instan*, which demonstrates a dedication to undifferentiating "national" languages, national and literary traditions, modes and matters of communication, and forms of knowledge at every page turn. Going on to trace the

characteristics of the Untranslatable, Apter describes the “quality of militant semiotic intransigence” associated with these important philosophical key words (*Against World Literature* 34). Untranslatables are not words that are not translated. On the contrary, they are words that are, as Apter writes, “resistant yet mobile” (*Against World Literature* 34).

Untranslatability is useful for understanding *Instan* in part because the binary of *a* source language translating (of course never without difficulty) to *a* target language is deeply unsatisfactory in the face of this text. For one thing, *Instan* is probably untranslatable in binary sense. It is a vastly multifaceted text that draws on and is composed from interwoven and undifferentiated languages and matters whose punning and play would be impossible to represent in another language, or even group of languages.

But this way of being of untranslatable, one that would be inherent to many multilingual and experimental texts, is not the Untranslatable explored by Apter and Cassin. Theirs is concerned with the ways important words within the history of philosophy have, in their interlinguistic movement, helped construct “worldscapes contoured by mistranslation, neologism, and semantic dissonance” (*Against World Literature* 38-39). These are words that may include a “non-carry-over...that carries over nonetheless” (35).

So while *Instan*’s mixed and multiple languages may mean it is untranslatable in the binary sense, its way of nearing the concept of the Untranslatable has more to do with how the book is exemplar of those literatures that create “language worlds that bleed out of dichotomized generic categories” (*Against World Literature* 43). In other words, *Instan* doesn’t need to be untranslatable in the binary sense because it already renders the very notion of the translation binary preposterously irrelevant. At the same time, it remains committed to “el milk del translate”—a vision of translation in which mistranslation, false friendship, and the “non-carry-

over” (*Against World Literature* 35) are not “deformations” (Berman) that occlude the historical connections between ideas and languages, but opportunities to render those connections visible, material, and substantial.

The leche that is latte is also, then, “latus: to carry, as in *relatus*: relate, translate” (dixio nary a diction). And “llevo llevo,” as the dixio nary a diction defines it, is “carry carry. Canoe carriers in the Amazon announce their trade shouting ‘llevo llevo’ (canoes are the taxis on the river)” (“dixio nary a diction”). The milk del translate, in turn, has to do with this carrying, one in which the often-etymologized Latin root of the word “translate” relates with Spanish and English words for carry, and the Amazonian practice of physically transporting people and goods by canoe.

That “latte” can (if we let it) echo like a homonym with the final syllable of the word “translate” helps to show how the “cognado potens” of *Instan* instantiates a translational space that involves a multimodal set of linguistic and material reverberations. Though these reverberations involve linguistic transformation, this transformation does not rely on differentiation. Instead, the poem uses these transformations to shed light on/bring into being the connections among, between, and beyond apparently discrete languages that are, as the book indicates, nourished by “una teta común.”

Fig. 2. “la leche de una teta común”

Polyglossic Politics

The interlingual puns that circulate throughout *Instan* can be understood as a gesture toward collectivity—one that emphasizes the coming-together of the multiple. Magda Sepúlveda argues that in the artist/poet’s practice there is a “yo colectivo” (collective ‘I’) in search of “un nuevo

lenguaje que dé cuenta de esta nueva subjetividad” (115). Though Sepúlveda’s focus there is on what we might call the lyrical I (or we), Vicuña’s interest in collectivity extends to the ways *Instan* relates with a multilingual community of readers.

This relationship intersects with the broader field of Latinx literature and poetry published in the United States. Though *Instan* is unique for both the linguistic breadth and multimedia diversity of its polyglossia, the text’s multilingualism is shared with other examples of Latinx literature. Before I address this, though, I would like to acknowledge that the terms “Latinx” and, by extension, “Latinx literature” are umbrella terms that capture and occlude an enormously heterogeneous group of individuals, identities, and literatures. As Ralph E. Rodriguez has argued,

there are more satisfying taxonomies and heuristics for grouping and analyzing literature than what scholars now recognize as the biological fiction but social reality of race. Even if one accepts the fiction of *Latinx* as a strategically instrumental tool in the struggle for social justice, it nevertheless confounds all reason to think that the heterogeneous communities and peoples from more than twenty different nations (who now reside in the United States) gathered under its mantle would produce a body of literary works that could be said to be recognizable because of the supposedly shared racial or ethnic identity of the authors. (4)

With this in mind, my discussion of Vicuña’s poetry in relation to the broader field of Latinx literature does not set out to claim that her work is representative of an aesthetic that is somehow inherent to literatures written by all authors who might identify as Latinx. Rodriguez has rightly criticized the suggestion that Latinx might be understood as an “aesthetic marker” rather than a “strategic category—a fiction employed to effect political outcomes” (4). To consider *Instan* in

relation to this strategic category, then, is not to suggest that all Latinx literature is marked by its incorporation of multiple languages. Rather, when literatures published in the United States incorporate multiple languages, the effect of this polyglossia can be political. As Rafael Pérez-Torres writes about Chicano literature, “Every Spanish word represents a refusal to capitulate to English ethnocentricity” (227).

The presence of Spanish in *Instan* (a book published in the United States) then, is both a rejection of “English ethnocentricity” as Pérez-Torres describes, and (as “instar” suggests) a *demand* the poet makes of the US’s predominantly monolingual publishing context. Vicuña left her native Chile spurred by the CIA-sponsored golpe de estado that overthrew Salvador Allende and installed the dictator Augusto Pinochet. US-supported violence in Latin America resulted (and continues to result) in countless disposessions. Vicuña’s intensely translingual text that everywhere, actively works to recover the connections among languages (primarily Spanish and English, though not limited to these) is a way not only of resisting the erasure of such connections, as Vicuña has suggested, but of opening real physical space for non- and extra-English poetry within the literary terrain of the US and its dominant language.

Instan also opens space for other American languages. Discussing her use of “material and poetic etymologies” in works like the *PALABRAs*,³ Alvergue writes of “Vicuña’s use of Mapundungun and other indigenous languages like Quechua” pointing out that these languages are “often ignored within the very same geographic spaces where Spanish and American English, dominant languages, are spoken, written, and ‘valued’” (Alvergue 79). As Alvergue suggests, Spanish, too, is a language whose history involves dominance and dispossession. This sentiment is echoed by Dowling, who writes that “discussions of language politics and bilingualism” in the

³ A collection of visually evocative, punning neologisms (such as “conrazón”) (Vicuña and Morgan).

United States “tend to ignore not only the conditions of US imperialism that that have historically brought and continue to bring Spanish-speaking populations within the borders of the United States but also the hemispheric conditions of colonialism in which English and Spanish alike function as tools of conquest” (35-36). In this context, *Instan*’s incorporation of Quechua, is a further gesture of linguistic inclusion that claims space for indigenous modes of communication within a complex and ongoing legacy of colonization (linguistic and otherwise).

Instan’s multilingualism can also be understood is akin to what Walter Mignolo calls “bilanguaging” and Rodrigo Rojas calls the condition of being “bilengual,” in that the book proposes, as Mignolo writes, “a condition of border thinking from the colonial difference” that can “open up to a postnational imaginary” (Mignolo 254; Rojas 10). As Rojas understands it, the bilengual poet is interested in translation, but as “una fuerza de resistencia que, por un lado, puede poner en duda el binarismo dominante/subordinado” that is often presumed in translation and “por otro, puede revertir la reducción de... culturas, lenguas y poéticas” (Rojas 10). Such a strategy of resistance is on display in *Instan*, albeit *multi*-lengually (to use Rojas’s neologistic “lengual” with an “e”).

A number of scholars have addressed the ways in which multilingual literatures create (or exclude) communities of readership. Describing Vickie Vértiz’s *Palm Frond with its Throat Cut*, Isabel Gómez writes that the book’s “32 poems challenge readers to follow complex shifts between voices that jump over lines broken and spaced across the page, code-switching between myriad registers of English and Spanish” (Gómez). As Gómez goes on to argue, “for a non-Spanish speaker, [Vértiz’s] poetry may be productively alienating, centering the reader who can follow her code-switching” (Gómez). Pérez-Torres similarly highlights this double action of

alienating and centering at work in interlingual Chicano literature, which he describes as “processes of inclusion and exclusion” (Pérez-Torres 214).

For Pérez-Torres a text such as the interlingual ones to which he refers excludes certain (particularly monolingual English) readers and includes those readers whose linguistic abilities enable them to follow the text. Like Gómez’s description of the “centering” at work in Vértiz’s book, Pérez-Torres draws attention to the “representational power” that can follow from the work of including readers whose language, community, and identity has been relegated to marginal or “minority” status by the dominant discourse.

Still, as he acknowledges, “this does not mean that any reader proficient in Spanish immediately gains access to interlingual texts” (Pérez-Torres 214). This is an important caveat for a text like *Instan*. As Dowling notes, “even when Vicuña restricts herself to the use of English and Spanish, or to only one of these two main languages, she alters words and invents neologisms in order to increase the connections among her linguistic sources”—something that also has the effect of decreasing her book’s relationship to language as it is actually spoken (38). And *Instan* combines more than Spanish and English, combines more, even, than just text with text.

Fig. 3. “gramma kellcani las venas del mundo encantando su salvación gramma kellcani”

Fig. 4. “el silencio y el ruidito del lápiz son mis consejeros draw write scratch”

Handwritten words in the two images in figures 3 and 4 spiral through Greek, Quechua, Spanish, and English. Drawings as much as text, these spirals recall other instances of the shape throughout the poet’s work, including *Espiral y Mar* featured in her film *Kon Kon*—a spiral scratched by Vicuña in the sand along the coast of the Chilean city, Concón. These handwritten words are also a record of the ways *Instan* registers the body in its multiply-lingual poetics.

The spirals from *Instan*, produced via the “ruidito” of the pencil scratching against paper, bring this act of drawing-writing-scratching into contact with words drawn from four languages. In terms of defining a readership, it’s fair to say that the group of readers who might be more or less adept in each of these languages is likely pretty small. This helps to illustrate how the movements of inclusion and exclusion/centering and alienation that mark multilingual texts need not directly correspond to some kind of real polyglot constituency to enact their politics. First of all, each appearance of Spanish, represents resistance against English. The appearance of Quechua, in turn, represents a resistance against the colonial erasure of the language and an attempt, on Vicuña’s part, to recover the knowledge it holds.

The Greek “gramma” shows up in the *dixio nary a diction* under the definition for the neologism “grammaticar,” defined as “a word made up from the Greek *gramma*, to scratch, draw and write, and the Spanish ending of a verb.” “Kellcani,” the *dixio nary a diction* tells us, is a “Quechua verb, writing and drawing.” The English words—“draw, write, scratch”—also compose the spiral in figure 4. Here then, the combination of these languages does not just yield a resistance against the monolingual dominance of English in the United States, but offers a gesture of connection, one that reveals the common *grammar* underlying purportedly disparate languages.⁴ This revelation also serves to subvert the hierarchies embedded within these languages, rooting the concept of draw/writing as much in indigenous America as in ancient

⁴ It may be possible to perceive this kind of inter- and multilinguistic approach to poetry as a naïve attempt to overwrite significant political fault lines with an optimistic and playful *Ursprache* that elides real histories of violence and oppression. But I would caution that we should be careful not to underestimate Vicuña’s dedication to revolutionary politics. One of the co-founders of “Artists for Democracy” in 1974, Vicuña was a dedicated socialist and was actively involved with global resistance movements against Chile’s dictatorship. She remains politically active today, especially in relation to ecological justice and indigenous rights.

Greece. Together, these languages are, as Vicuña writes in the “carta or end note,” “opening up to reveal ancient or future meanings.”

The community of readers *Instan* includes, and indeed creates, is potentially pretty large—it’s essentially anyone willing to do the work it takes to read this book. That includes turning the pages as the spirals direct and piecing together sometimes unfamiliar words, whose letters are scattered across the page like a verbal connect-the-dots.

Fig. 5. Two page spread from *Instan*

Its gesture of “representational power” is not just tied to its ability to multilingually represent, or speak in the language of, a corresponding real-world community that has suffered from linguistic and geographic dispossession (Pérez-Torres 214). Although, that is part of it. *Instan* empowers by demanding readers—monolingual and otherwise—do the work of recognizing the shared connections among languages that are obscured, suppressed, or rejected by the lived politics of the contemporary, and historical, Americas. And it presses forward for a language that might emerge were these connections made visible.

Pérez-Torres notes that “for many people responding to a ‘foreign’ language on the printed page is disorienting” and further, “to find this ‘foreign’ tongue interalia imprinted within native speech approaches a violation” (212). The kind of violation Pérez-Torres describes echoes an approach that, in the context of translation practice, Lawrence Venuti has deemed “foreignization”—“a strategic cultural intervention in the current state of world affairs, pitched against the hegemonic English-language nations and the unequal cultural exchanges in which they engage their global others” (20). In translation, foreignizing involves retaining, rather than restraining, features of a source text that mark its cultural or linguistic distance from the presumed target language and culture. As Venuti argues, “Foreignizing translation in English can

be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations” (20).

In some ways, a foreignizing use of language can be understood as activated in *Instan*. After all, essentially all of its readers will encounter words whose linguistic belonging appears “foreign” to them. And, as I’ve noted, the inclusion of, especially, Spanish and Quechua in this book published in the United States, involves, as Venuti writes, “resistance against ethnocentrism and racism” (20). That said, *Instan* also problematizes Venuti’s category of the “global other” and isn’t actually, on Venuti’s terms, a translation anyway.

Instan is not a target text. And, in part because every reader of *Instan* will find something “foreign” to them, none of the book’s features can be neatly categorized as “foreign” or “other.” Undertaking such a categorization would involve imposing an unwarranted linguistic homogeneity on its readership. *Instan*’s readers could, and do, include mono-, bi-, and polylingual readers and each of the languages the book spans, combines, and mixes can occupy the position of “foreign” for some of them, some of the time. The conditions of its publication in the United States do disrupt the hold of English as the country’s dominant (and dominating) language, but they also shed light on the fact that the United States is not, anyway, a monolingual English speaking nation at all. The space that this translingual text claims for itself within the terrain of US literature is a way of asserting this. Neither its author nor the fact of its multilingualism is actually “other” to the United States.

Also, I would argue that *Instan*’s “milk del translate” and incorporation of many, variously “foreign” languages is in service of the opposite effect of a textual strategy whose function involves highlighting alterity. The work of *Instan* is work consistently opposed to the very cleaving of languages upon which foreignization depends. Its approach does make it, as

Vicuña writes in the “carta or end note” “readable or unreadable” from the perspective of each of its incorporated languages. And this does yield an estranging experience, akin to the one that might take hold in a target text whose translator favored a foreignizing approach. But, *Instan* seeks a kind of common estrangement that arises precisely by way of an undifferentiation among languages—one that seeks to stress their connections and discover new, and future, ways of speaking from languages’ shared histories.

If there is something *Instan* seeks to estrange, it would not be any of the book’s actual readers. Rather, as Claudia Panozo M. writes, the poet’s work is marked by a “pretensión de desestabilizar el discurso hegemónico” (162). Panozo describes this in the context of Vicuña’s intent to establish a “contra-discurso” against the falsehoods spread in Chile by the CIA around the time of the golpe de estado. While *Instan* is less overtly engaged with international politics, it remains committed to the creation of a counterdiscourse, one that, in *Instan*’s case is constituted by connecting and combining supposedly divergent modes of communication.

Instan’s approach to such an understanding of language is stressed in these lines from “fábulas del comienzo y restos del origen/fables of the beginning and remains of the origin”:

Per haps, *in di vi dual* says

un divided dual attention

un divided dual belonging

to itself and the whole at once.

Dis solve into union it says.

You will always be longing (“fábulas del comienzo y restos del origen/fables of the beginning and remains of the origin”)

As these lines suggest, *Instan* is interested in an approach to, and an understanding of, language that works to dissolve what’s individuated into what’s dual, whole, united. In this, there are echoes of her socialist politics and the assertion early in her career that socialism and poetry are

“lo único que nos puede salvar” (Vicuña, *Saborami* 38). In some ways, the kind of unified language *Instan* proposes here also echoes what Walter Benjamin describes as “the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language” (259). Vicuña’s lines, though, don’t assert, as Benjamin does, a judgment about truth. Still, the proposal to “dis solve into union,” alongside the phrase “always be longing” does seem to share with Benjamin’s notion of “pure language” a sense that this is a language just beyond the horizon—a language longed-for but not yet realized.

Contrary to this suggestion, I would argue that the “un divided dual belonging” *Instan* describes is also an “un divided dual belonging” the book instantiates. *Instan*’s undifferentiated approach to language and “el milk del translate” is not some kind of messianic longing for a language that is always coming into being, but never finally arriving at being. It already is that language.

Matter and/of Language

This is important to point out, because the work of Vicuña’s oeuvre at large, *Instan* included, involves a real attempt at recovering knowledge and modes of communication that have been erased, disappeared, or exiled by historical and contemporary politics in the Americas. A recurring feature of Vicuña’s work is her interest in the Andean record keeping and communication device, the khipu. The subject (and object) of her recent “Disappeared Quipu” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum (among many others), khipus are “complex record-keeping devices, made of knotted cords, that served as an essential medium for reading and writing, registering and remembering” in the Andean region (“Cecilia Vicuña: Disappeared Quipu”).⁵ Outlawed by Spanish colonizers, the knowledge khipus held underwent a severe form of erasure.

⁵ With its references to the disappeared, the exhibition *Disappeared Quipu* also recalls the violence perpetrated by Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile.

Recovering the khipu as a language of communication relates to a second reason why it's important to point out that the undifferentiated approach to language that is active in *Instan* is not a fantasy for a language that has not yet materialized. The language that composes *Instan* is absolutely instantiated, substantial, material. This is something that is true of the khipu as well, despite the fact that what it communicates is not now transparent to Western scholars.

The khipu's medium of communication is thread or string. String threads throughout Vicuña's practice—poetic and otherwise—and recalls the khipu but not (just) as a symbol. This fact is addressed in Julie Phillips Brown's discussion of Vicuña's *cloud-net* (a multifaceted work of weaving that spans installation, performance, and multilingual poetry). Citing a private interview with the artist/poet, Phillips Brown writes:

For Vicuña, there is no question. In my conversation with the poet in the summer of 2009, she was adamant that “language can be completely physical, can be completely tactile...because it is completely tactile when it becomes, for example, a thread – a thread is language. This is not a metaphor. This is so.” (216)

Vicuña and Rosa Alcalá's artist book *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread* is another example of Vicuña's integration of string or thread with already multiply-lingual poetry. In this book, string punches through each page, binding the book together and, when tied, restricting its ability to open.

Fig. 6. *Palabra e hilo / Word & Thread*

Its first line reads “La palabra es un hilo y el hilo es lenguaje.” This is repeated on another page in English: “Word is a thread and the thread is language.” Like *Instan*, *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread* has no page numbers. This book's multilingualism is more discrete, i.e. the Spanish and English do not intermingle from word to word, but rather page by page. To borrow a phrase from

Rebecca Walkowitz, *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread* is “born translated” in that it belongs to a category of literary works for whom “translation is not secondary or incidental” but rather “a condition of their production” (4).

As the first lines of *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread* indicate, it’s not just alphabetic language that partakes of this book’s production. In addition to the reciprocity between Spanish and English evident in its condition as a bilingual book, there is reciprocity at work in *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread* between “la palabra/word,” and “el hilo/the thread.” As Lucy Lippard has pointed out, “in sacred Quechua, the word for language is ‘thread’; the word for complex conversation is ‘embroidering’” (11). In *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread* Each of these is the other. And the presence of string, against which the reader must work to read this book, underscores that what Vicuña and Alcalá assert with these bilingual opening lines cannot be reduced to mere metaphorical association.⁶

Reciprocity between language and thread is echoed in *Instan*, though this book doesn’t incorporate any actual string (other than language, that is). *Instan* is perfect bound, so there is no stitching in the binding either. Still, Vicuña finds numerous opportunities to undifferentiate language and thread in *Instan*, starting in the first section, “gramma kellcani (the drawings).”

Fig. 7. “word loom star”

In the image in figure 7, Vicuña connects the words “word,” “loom,” and “star” through a series of threadlike pencil lines. We already know from “gramma kellcani” that this section of the book (and those Greek/Quechua terms) undifferentiate the activities of writing and drawing (and scratching). Natural languages, too, are undifferentiated from one another as *Instan*’s wordplay

⁶ Thank you to Sarah Bennison for drawing my attention to the visual similarity between Vicuña and Alcalá’s *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread* and the khipu boards that, in at least one known instance, incorporate both string and alphabetic text. For more information and images, see Hyland “Ancash Khipu Board.”

tumbles through and across them with no real barrier. Images like the one in figure 7 add weaving to this mix of languages and modes of inscription.

It might be possible to see *Instan*'s appeals to weaving and thread as less material than those invited by the single string binding of *Palabra e hilo / Word and Thread*. But, as Kenneth Sherwood writes about another of Vicuña's poems called "la realidad es una línea"—which, as he describes "consists of this one line of poetry written, seemingly with a single stroke, on both sides of a card that is folded and bound with black thread"—"Vicuña reminds us that letters are as physical as string" (82). This kind of reminder is also at work in *Instan*, which presses the suggestion that language, drawing, and thread (among other things) ought each to be understood as physical, material, substantial. Again, this assertion is not just a metaphoric one. The word-loom-star image urges this idea, first by connecting "word" and "loom" with the drawn lines, and second, though an interlingual process of association that takes place throughout the text between the English word "star" and the Spanish "estar."

The final lines of *Instan*'s second section, "el poema cognado / the poem" read:

el instan

estrella
interior

el

e

star

("el poema cognado / the poem")

With this in mind, it's important to read the word "star" in the interlingual context of its partial belonging to the Spanish verb for "to be." The "carta or end note" repeats this assertion, describing "the inner star 'standing' in the verb 'to be': estar." The word-loom-star image, then, is a way of asserting, once again, that words and looms of thread don't just approximate one

another but achieve, together, some state of *being* one another. As the lines above from “el poema cognado / the poem” further suggest, this connection, this undifferentiation, has to do with interiority and the very title of this text—*el instan*.

“Star” in the word-loom-star image is, here and elsewhere, also a reference to stars in the sky. Such stars are recalled by the below lines from “el poema cognado / the poem”:

es el con
s tellation (“el poema cognado / the poem”)

Yet, like almost everything in *Instan*, stars and constellations don’t have a single referent to which they refer. The “carta or end note,” with its reference to the Milky Way, assures stars also take part in the open-ended play of “el milk del translate.” In the lines cited above, con/s tellation implies in English an invented word for conversation or story telling. And “constellation” in the context of 20th century experimental poetics recalls the concrete poems of Bolivian-Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer, which also exploit the visual arrangement of words on the page. As Rachel Robinson points out, when understood as a constellation, a poem is “a drawn map created by the spatial relationships between the stars, that is, the words, on the page” (37).

Carla María Macchiavello has written about Vicuña’s PALABRAs that it’s possible “leerlas como una poesía vanguardista por el desdibujamiento (o rediseño) de los límites entre arte y literatura que efectúan y la forma indisciplinada de creación poética a la que invitan” (68). And it’s true that there is a strong association between Vicuña’s poetry and other visual-verbal vanguard practices in 20th century Chile and around the world. But the poems in *Instan*’s first section differ from Gomringer’s constellations (and other contemporaneous experiments with concrete poetry) in a number of ways. Vicuña’s poems are hand-drawn rather than typeset, and

include more than letters from the Roman alphabet. This feature of the text may suggest that Vicuña's poetry incorporates extralinguistic materials, but I want to again underscore the notion that for the artist/poet language is itself material. Conversely, the drawn lines that connect words and letters within *Instan*'s constellations are also linguistic, and a vital part of the word-loom out of which *Instan*'s poetry emerges.

The undifferentiation that marks Vicuña's approach to poetry, then, extends to those parts of the text that might more readily be perceived as non- or extra-linguistic materials. These include the lines and shapes that form or are formed by words, the language that is also thread, and the constellation of dots and small pencil marks that make up the final pages of *Instan*'s first section. We can take Vicuña at her literal word and understand language and matter as two further categories rendered undifferent by *Instan*. Though this is a hallmark of other visual and material approaches to poetry, *Instan*'s insistence on this fact is entangled with her resistance to the erasure of the forms of knowledge (and, here, communication) associated with indigenous women. This comes through in the book's emphasis on weaving—traditionally women's work—and in its invocation of the khipu.

Alvergue discusses Vicuña's "part land-art, part poetic performance" from 1966 called "Con-cón" and points to the work's use of "dissonance and onomatopoeia" (60). He argues these strategies overlap with features of "Mapundungun, the language of the Mapuche of Chile" noting that "Vicuña often borrows from Mapundungun, which is a morphological language, to potentialize what is for North American readers and audiences a long lost attribute of language, namely, aurality and situatedness" (60). As Alvergue explains "Mapundungun's syntax develops in situ between speakers" and entails an "encounter with the materiality of language" (60). A similar "encounter" is at work in *Instan*, whose insistence on the thread-nature of language is a

way of recovering, within multilingual America of the 21st century, a material mode of communication that was not simply “lost” but actively suppressed. *Instan* includes words written in Quechua as well as lines and threads of language that recall (and attempt to recover) the knotted communication device the khipu. Quechua is a language family that includes within it a number of variants upon which alphabetic orthography was imposed. Its inclusion in *Instan* among Spanish, English, and other languages is one way of insisting on the book’s undifferentiating approach to language and “el milk del translate.” But its appearance there also registers the effects of a set of values and modes of communication imposed through colonization and the continued suppression of indigenous identities and traditions by the West.

Instan’s incorporation of string and khipu-adjacent modes of inscription helps to retain these communicative systems and practices against such erasures. The undifferentiation among languages, and between language and matter, activated by *Instan* is thus more than vanguard poetic play. And the political implications of this play, which include the favoring of multilingual readers, also have to do with resistance to imperial and oppressive language policies which would privilege English, or Spanish, or alphabetically-based systems of writing and recording.

The khipu’s system of communication is still being deciphered by Western scholars, and much about them remains unknown to this audience and likely underestimated. Sabine Hyland points to the ways in which the khipu and its mode of communication has been misunderstood by Westerners who held doubts about the extent to which these devices were capable of communicating complex ideas, narratives, and histories to audiences beyond a khipu’s individual maker. She describes how many researchers have argued “that khipus served merely as memory aids, recording only numbers and comprehensible only to their makers” (“Writing with Twisted

Cords” 412). Counter to this misperception, Hyland argues that khipus, in fact, comprise an “extraordinarily sophisticated communication system” (“Writing with Twisted Cords” 418) and Hyland’s recent work with “the epistolary khipus of Collata” sheds light on, as she writes, “the extent to which twisted and colored cords can encode logosyllabic texts” (“Writing with Twisted Cords” 418).

Instan’s invocation of the khipu neither underestimates its communicative potential nor sets out to authoritatively decipher it for Western audiences. This enables the khipu to maintain its visibility and to join with the other languages and modes of communication that contribute to *Instan*. It does this without ceding to the demand that it make its particular mode of communication transparently intelligible to readers of the book’s other languages. So just as *Instan* urges a reflection on the materiality of alphabetic text and, generally, poetry written in such text, it also creates space for other linguistic materialities to partake of the poem without their materiality giving way, in translation or otherwise, to meaning.

Translation can be helpful for considering the Vicuña’s references to the khipu, which, as Dowling acknowledges, are “somewhat fanciful” and involve a degree poetic liberty and inaccuracy that is typical of *Instan*’s “milk del translate” (48). Also typical for *Instan* is a priority on the materiality of linguistic communication—something US poet and translator Jerome Rothenberg addresses in reflecting on his translations of Navajo and Seneca poetry. In his essay “Total Translation,” he remarks on how “the voice carried many sounds that weren’t [to English speakers] ‘words,’” noting that “these tended to disappear or be attenuated in translation” (202). I bring up Rothenberg’s notion of “total translation” not to suggest any inherent commonalities between the diverse languages of indigenous America. Rather, I wish to highlight both

Alvergue's and Rothenberg's attention to aurality, and to suggest that an analogous concern with linguistic materiality is at work in *Instan*'s particular approach to translation.

Because the khipu's mode of communication has not yet been deciphered by the heirs of the very colonizers who first suppressed its use, it's possible to see how a contemporary North American text that might wish to engage with these communication devices, via a translational process, might end up "disappear[ing] or attenuat[ing]" in Rothenberg's words, their manner of recording ideas, facts, and narratives. *Instan*, though, takes steps to "re-cordar." Addressing "the correspondence between *recordar* and *cuerdas*, strings of memory" in Vicuña's poetry, Sherwood writes that "memory and language exist in relation to the activity and materials of weaving" (84). For *Instan*, remembering involves the re-cording of language's materiality and the refusal to disappear Inka modes of communication within a text that draws together a panoply of American languages.

Emily Apter writes in "Untranslatability and the Geopolitics of Reading" that what is "'not-translated' reads no longer as an admission that translation is difficult to the point of impossibility but instead as a tactic of withholding translation deployed against the predominance of global English" (199). Vicuña shares an investment in the productive potential of what Apter describes as "areas of linguistic difficulty, translation failure, and forms of nonnegotiable singularity that are negotiated nonetheless" ("Untranslatability" 196). This comes across in her invocation of the khipu, which withholds meaning, but nevertheless offers a translation that takes place from string to drawings, both of which are simultaneously, for Vicuña, writing. The false-friend-style punning identifiable in the book's "el milk del translate" also exploits the potential for translation where material, rather than meaningful, connections lie. *Instan*'s translational work with the khipu underscores that the practice can reside entirely in the

materiality of language. This is a gesture of recovery for Vicuña, one that resists Western understandings of translation as a primarily meaningful transfer. Such an understanding, *Instan* shows, only replicates the colonial erasure of indigenous communication by discarding the material of language now that its meaning has already been disappeared.

Instan is in some ways a book that looks back, and write from, the shared roots of the languages it incorporates. But it importantly presses a forward-looking demand as well. The book, nourished by “el milk del translate”, makes an intervention in the present. It provides a model for linguistic encounters and transformations that, rather than reifying the boundaries among languages, makes poetry from their indistinction. It works to recover and reconnect, in the present, modes of communication and knowledge that have been suppressed, erased, or rendered immaterial by the violent machinations of politics.

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